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Pentecost XIV & Proper 17
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Text: Romans 12:9 – 21
Title: God's Greater Plan for You – Living in Love

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Our text from Romans today can be challenging. Paul instructs us to God's people can be overwhelming. "Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil. Hold fast to what is good. Love one another . . . be fervent in spirit . . . rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer" and that's only a portion of the first three verses. Listening to his words it's easy to feel exhausted, incapable, and unworthy. To wonder if the Holy Spirit could ever form all of these desires of God in us. Paul's list is overwhelming, and it leaves us wondering, Where do we start? What should we pay attention to? What is a Christian to do with all of these expectations?"

Let's say you were to take one point a day and really focus on it. Monday, you take "Let love be genuine" and all day, you try to demonstrate genuine love to all. Passing by a neighbor in the store you say, "how are you doing?" And then you stop to really listen and respond to what's happening. For that day, love is more than the words of a casual greeting. It involves action, care, and sincerity. On Tuesday you move to the next item and work on "Abhor what is evil." If you were to do this each day for each of these instructions, it would take you almost a month to get through the list, if your sinful self could actually do each one. Paul's list of instructions is overwhelming to the Christian. Maybe that was the point Paul was getting at – not with commands about what we have to be doing, but with a glimpse of the Kingdom of God coming alive in our lives. This isn't a twelve-step program from St. Paul to "build the better spiritual you." It's more a list of how God is at work in and through us, and Paul invites you to consider that today, in our little corner of the world, we are part God's Kingdom.

Think of what it was like for the early Christians in Rome. It was considered the center of the world. The city was filled with monuments, arches, forums, and images honoring military victories and rulers. There were temples for worshipping gods and goddesses, and even past leaders who were now proclaimed gods.

Now imagine being a Christian in Rome, surrounded by such images of power. It might have made the early Christians question the power of God. They were gathering in house churches with no political or military strength. They didn't have a system for training pastors. They didn't have libraries of Christian books, or even the New Testament as we know it. They had the Old Testament Scriptures, and the apostles' teachings, including this letter from Paul. Surrounded by images and temples of the imperial cult, these Christians probably wondered about the Kingdom of God. How could it come to a place like Rome?

For these Christians, St. Paul paints this overwhelming picture today. He gives them a glimpse into the ways of God. Paul would agree that there was a war going on, a conflict that threatened the lives of God's people. His list includes the figures of war. He speaks of enemies of God's people, tribulation, persecution, and evil that needs to be abhorred. But Paul doesn't call for military action. He calls the people of faith to service to others with the words, "do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

Paul knows that the hope of the Christian doesn't rest in the Caesars or any earthly leader, but in the Lord Jesus Christ. The One who overcame evil with good. The work of Christ for our salvation wasn't a military march through the streets of Rome, but a journey of self-sacrifice ending in Jerusalem. In the Gospel reading today, Jesus speaks of His passion. He gives us the story of God that saves the world.

I'm sure many of you have seen *The Passion of the Christ* by Mel Gibson. That movie is an intense depiction of Good Friday. It also shows the power of Rome as a force to be reckoned with. Their brutal power and system of punishment stripped all enemies of human dignity and exercised force above all. Hidden within that brutality, however, was the self-sacrificial work of God. And it is that one small story, not walking in triumphant procession through Rome, but making its way through the streets of Jerusalem, that is our source of peace and hope.

Gibson's movie has a scene that captures this vision of God and the sacrifice of Jesus that brings peace. It isn't in Scripture, so Gibson takes some artistic license to reflect Scripture and what God is teaching us to see by faith. He shows Jesus having a last chance to speak to His mother Mary on the way to the crucifixion. Jesus is bloodied and beaten, carrying His cross, and He falls for the third time. Mary is nearby and reaches out as if to catch Him as she has flashbacks to raising Him, and as she does Jesus stops and reaches out to her. Then He quotes Isaiah 43, "Behold I make all things new." When Mary sees her son's coming death, Jesus reveals to her life, and teaches us that this horrible destruction is God's most creative act.

God is in control and at work for the world in the sacrifice of Jesus. While Rome flexes its military muscle and the religious leaders implement their deceptive strategies and God's people give in to despair and give up their hope, God is still in complete control. Jesus walks through the streets of Jerusalem to offer His life as the sacrifice that forgives all sins for all people for all time. In Jesus is our source of peace with God, and in Him is hope for the world. This is the peace that Paul knows and proclaims to the Roman Christians and to you today. But this peace isn't something that we only look back at, remembering an event in history. No, Paul invites the Roman Christians and you today to live in this peace now, as you experience the Kingdom of God.

What does such life look like? In the Gospel reading, Jesus turns to His disciples and asks that they follow Him. “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.” We know these words. We’ve heard them before. Some of us have committed them to memory. But what does it mean to take up your cross and follow Jesus?

This is what Paul gives us a glimpse of in his letter today. Notice the types of things that Paul celebrates in his listing. For Rome, it took massive military campaigns to build a monument. Rome began its conquests in 218 BC. It took 200 years of fighting and conquest until they could finally declare victory under Augustus, and they celebrated their victory with a massive monument called the Altar of Peace. This list from St. Paul contains no massive military victories. Instead, it celebrates the small, seemingly inconsequential ways of God. Acts of brotherly affection. Caring for the needs of the saints. Taking notice of the lowly. And even loving one’s enemies. Offering a cup of water or a gift of food to an enemy who is thirsty and hungering. These are the ways of the Kingdom of God.

The Romans carved figures of leadership into marble and made them into gods as a way of celebrating peace. God forms His kingdom not with stones or conquest, but with flesh and blood. He takes you as His people, washes you in Holy Baptism, fills you with His Spirit, and brings you to New Life. These works may not be noticed by the world or celebrated as a major turning point in history. His work might just be a moment when you rejoice with someone who rejoices or cry with someone who cries. But these are works of God. They are real life expressions of God’s Spirit at work in our world, bringing about a different kind of peace.

When we read this as a list that comes at us all at once, these words can be confusing and challenging. It’s hard to know where to start. But when encountered as a way in which God’s

Spirit works through flesh and blood in this world, these words are comforting and encouraging because they are not our work. They are God's work. They open our eyes to see the ways in which God is near us, very near us in daily life. Once you hear these words from Paul, you begin to see God at work among His people all the time. And the vision, no matter how small, no matter how insignificant, can bring you eternal joy.

This is the vision Paul invites us to see today. I mentioned Rome's Altar of Peace before, a massive marble monument built to the glory of the Roman Empire. If you want to see it, you can catch a flight to Rome and go to a museum. Once there, you can see that celebration of the power and the glory of Rome that they built for themselves. At the time, it challenged the Roman Christians and all people. It claimed peace and glory by the power of Rome. Today, that monument is a relic. The victories it celebrated, the empire it served, the peace it promised, it's all gone. No more than a memory.

But the vision of God that St. Paul wrote about in his letter. The kingdom of God that came in Jesus. The peace of God that His Spirit works among His people. These all remain. Paul calls you to see God alive and at work today in all of us. Paul doesn't need to take you to a museum. No, he invites you to only look around at the people God has gathered in His presence. Your brothers and sisters in Christ. Here, God is at work in love. He has called you in Christ to be His people. He has forgiven you and made you His own. And now He works in you and through you by the power of His Holy Spirit. You can see God at work. Not in great stories of massive military victories but in small stories of self-sacrifice and everyday acts of love. In these ways and with these people, God continues to work in human history, leading us all in holy procession to that day when He will return and bring to earth His heavenly Kingdom that will have no end. Amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.